

NORTH CAROLINA STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE
Office of Archives and History
Department of Cultural Resources

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Greenville Commercial Historic District Additional Documentation

Greenville, Pitt County, PT1420, Listed 9/16/2009

Nomination by Druscilla York

Photographs by Druscilla York, September 2008 and March 2009



Blount-Harvey Department Store, façade view



White's Theater, façade view

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[Note: Only amended items and the required NPS certification are included below.]

1. Name of Property: Greenville Commercial Historic District – Additional Documentation

3. State/Federal Agency Certification: As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant locally.

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources
State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:	Signature of the Keeper	Date of Action
___ entered in the National Register	_____	_____
___ determined eligible for the National Register	_____	_____
___ determined not eligible for the National Register	_____	_____
___ removed from the National Register	_____	_____
___ other (explain:)	_____	_____

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6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE / theater

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

VACANT / NOT IN USE

7. Narrative Description

Over the last four years, the integrity of two pivotal buildings constructed within the historic district's period of significance, namely White's Theatre (1914) and the Blount-Harvey Department Store (1923), has dramatically improved with the removal in both cases of false facades. Each was documented as non-contributing in the original historic district nomination. Restoration of the Blount-Harvey Department Store was completed in 2007 using Federal Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credits. Another commercial gem was revealed in 2007 when the original façade of White's Theatre was exposed following the removal of a massive aluminum facade and a blond brick veneer. Plans for its restoration are now underway by its new owner, the City of Greenville. Both properties are now contributing buildings within the Greenville Commercial Historic District.

300 Block South Evans Street, West Side

10 330 South Evans Street Blount-Harvey Department Store contributing 1923

The Blount-Harvey Department Store, completed in 1923, embodies the early use in small towns of self-supporting metal frames in the construction of large public, commercial, and industrial buildings during the early twentieth century. Completed in 2007, the restoration of its exterior facades using federal tax credits physically renewed the building's connection with its historic contribution in the growth of Greenville's downtown. The interior was modernized, however, maintaining its structural form. The Blount-Harvey Department Store was initially the town's largest retail store and the first built as a modern department store. (Exhibit 1) As designed, a steel skeletal pier and-spandrel system supports this fireproof brick building, which soon thereafter included the modern addition of an elevator.

Facing east, this two-story building with mezzanine features a standard commercial brick façade that is symmetrically ordered in a progressive manner utilizing distinctive cast stone accents. Its form features three bays extending across the Evans Street façade and nine-bays along the 4th Street façade. A reproduction central marquee protects the recessed central entrance. It features a pressed tin apron with scalloped edge and acorn-shaped finials. The main entry has a double-leaf doorway flanked by large paned sidelights and diagonally-placed display windows. These built-in displays are the only exterior elements retained from the 1958 modernization. (Exhibit 2) The 4th Street façade includes a smaller store front in the western two bays and next to it a secondary entrance into the main building.

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Each facade is identical in detail but not definition. Both are separated into three levels: ground floor, second floor, and parapet. Most brickwork is laid in basic common bond. Piers encased in brick simulate buttresses that feature two offsets. Each helps accent the verticality of the street façades. At the southeast corner, two join to form a distinctive angle buttress. At the parapet, a tall one-piece stone offset provides a dramatic crowning accent. These offsets also tie in horizontally with the simple stone sills beneath each transom window, the decorative stone cornice beneath the parapet, and the simple stone parapet cap. Each cornice block has a plain drip slope and a coved underside highlighted by a central circular gear motif. Small crenels or embrasures with stone drip moldings further define the parapet line. A stone eight-pointed star with quatrefoil inset is centrally placed within each brick parapet segment. A planar stone shield also accents each ground-floor buttress beneath each offset. In addition, a plain stone base which rises in height at each buttress extends along the street façades. Only at the small store entrance does this base convert to wood and contain replicas of the star design. Other masonry detailing includes a horizontal chain of rectilinear patterned brickwork in each bay between the transom windows and the second floor windows. Within each Evans Street bay, a chain of four defines this area; however, on 4th Street there are three. Each mirrors the fenestration pattern of the second floor.

Along the street façades, the fenestration pattern of each bay varies only slightly. The principal façade facing Evans Street contains ground-floor display window units featuring three large panes, multi-paned transoms with over translucent 500 lights, and window groupings that contain four double-hung sash with one-over-one lights. Proportionately, the side façade is slightly different. Here each bay is narrower, so display window units contain two large panes, transoms have fewer lights, and windows are grouped in units of three with a standard center one flanked by narrower sash. At street level, the eastern two bays are display windows, the next three bays are in filled with brick and contain business lettering, the next two bays are for display and a side entrance, and the last two bays are the entrance and display window for a separate small shop. Above the shop, side entrance and display window are differing types of transom windows that provide additional internal light. Simple fabric awnings protect each display window from direct sunlight.

100 Block of West Fifth Street, North Side

42	110 West Fifth Street	White's Theatre	contributing	1914
	(property was incorrectly listed as 114 West 5 th Street in original nomination)			

Until 2007, an applied façade obscured the original architectural character of White's Theatre, which was built in 1914 by local builder Burwell Riddick for Samuel T. White. With plans to re-open the theatre for stage, music, theatre, and cinema productions, the City of Greenville's Redevelopment Commission purchased the structure in 2008. A key component of the project is the restoration of its monumental façade with distinctive Dutch Colonial Revival-style details such as its curvilinear parapet and handsome doors with graceful fanlights that flank the central entrance.

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In the design of early twentieth-century theatres, an oversized central entrance bay dominated the façade in scale and detail and was flanked by secondary entrances. The symmetrically fenestrated façade of White's Theatre's, originally featured a large central bay that projected slightly forward, a raised parapet with a handsome central arch, a run of frieze windows beneath a deep modillion cornice, and a large recessed central entrance that was flanked by two additional street entrances with delicate fanlights. Originally, a dramatic, broad flight of steps extended into the open recessed entry. Here patrons once gained admittance by purchasing a ticket and then entering the lobby through paired double-leaf doors. A tall perpendicular electric sign that flashed "White's Theatre" rose above the entrance.(Exhibit 3) By 1916, a handsome marquee protected the central entrance. (Exhibit 4) The interior included seating for 680, a large stage, orchestra pit, and balcony.

Brick corbelling highlights and complements the façade's major design elements. Above each entrance, this brickwork is used to create outlines of various geometric shapes in a linear arrangement. Originally, the horizontal strength of the modillion block cornice was paired with rectangular forms while the curvilinear shape of the Dutch Colonial Revival-style parapet was paired with a balanced combination of rectangles, triangles and a central circle. Simple brick pilasters flank each secondary entrance, which also features a semi-circular arch outlined by corbelled brick. By 1958, these secondary entries were fully enclosed, and the infilled areas used as billboards to display posters advertizing current and coming attractions.

Nearly forty years ago in 1971 the theatre was renamed the Park after undergoing extensive remodelling and moderizations. Its new front façade had "buff brick to the marquee level, with aluminum facer from the marquee to the top of the building."¹ This remodelling also required removal of the recessed entrance and steps as well as the modillion cornice. By 2008 after being vacant for years, the theatre has become a key element component of Greenville's downtown revitalization, and its original façade was revealed following the removal of most of the 1971 façade additions. Today the entrance is boarded up and the theatre awaits preservation.

¹ "Park Theatre Opens Tomorrow," *Daily Reflector*, March 24, 1971.

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8.Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria
(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- ☒ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☐ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions)

Entertainment/Recreation

Period of Significance
1914-1952

Significant Dates
1914, 1923

Architect/Builder
Riddick, Burwell , builder

Narrative Statement of Significance

White’s Theatre embodies the design features and popular use of newly constructed theatres during the 1910s and 1920s as vaudeville playhouses as well as moving picture theatres, and it is locally significant under Criterion A for entertainment/recreation. As the national obsession for movies exploded during the 1910s, theatres in small municipalities across the country were built for this dual purpose. Completed in 1914 and constructed by local builder Burwell Riddick, White’s Theatre clearly illustrates this national theatre trend, serving continuously as a theatre throughout a period of significance from 1914-1952. With the advent of talking pictures in 1927, many theatres were refurbished for the sole purpose of showing movies. White’s Theatre underwent a similar transformation in 1930 and was renamed the State Theatre. Today, it stands as a contributing building within the Greenville Commercial Historic District and as the only early twentieth-century theatre in Greenville.

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Entertainment/Recreation Context

Completed in 1914 by local builder Burwell Riddick for Samuel T. White, White's Theatre embodies an increasingly popular transition in the entertainment business during the first half of the twentieth century from traveling vaudeville acts and theatrical productions toward feature films—the movies. Its opening on June 22, 1914, marked the beginning of this theatre's longstanding contribution throughout the twentieth century to entertainment in Greenville.² Today its history and current preservation plan reflect this important era in American entertainment.

The exhibition of a projected motion picture as a commercial venture was first introduced to a paying public in Paris on December 28, 1895. Earlier in September at the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition, however, demonstrations had been given of an improved projection device for films on a screen. As innovations quickly progressed, viewing films became an integral component of most entertainment venues across the United States. The earliest movie theatres, nickelodeons, were converted dance halls or storefront theatres that charged a nickel as an entrance fee to view films, also called flickers. Harry Davis's nickelodeon, which opened in 1905 in Pittsburgh, is recognized as one of the first free-standing nickelodeons constructed. The 200-seat Electric Theatre in Los Angeles, built in 1902, is thought to be the first permanent free-standing movie theatre built in the United States to exhibit solely movies. By 1912, the growing popularity for grander, more modern movie theatres or palaces had initiated the demise of nickelodeons.³

In North Carolina, the popularity of film as a new form of entertainment played out primarily in established opera houses in towns and cities across the state. Most were located on the second floor of a principal building, ranging from Masonic halls to livery stables. By 1906, however, early movie theatres or nickelodeons began cropping up in stores or small commercial buildings. Over the next ten years, with the rapid development of feature films, nickelodeons were replaced by larger theatres. In many communities, films and other forms of performing arts were inextricably mixed, and the showing of silent films was dramatized by musical accompaniment. In such eastern North Carolina towns as New Bern, Greenville, and Washington, theatres constructed in the 1910s continued to maintain formal stages for vaudeville and one-night stand acts, but movies were becoming increasingly important. Large towns often supported several theatres, while in smaller towns, such as Williamston in 1913, people simply patronized offerings at the opera house. In New Bern, architect H. W. Simpson designed the "Athens," an impressive 700-seat Classical Revival style vaudeville theatre that opened April 13, 1911.⁴

The earliest theatrical productions in Greenville jointly shared buildings with other businesses or meeting halls in the downtown area. The town's first theatre, Skinner's Opera House, opened on May 9, 1883. Col. Harry

Deleted: Skinner had this two-story brick structure constructed near the courthouse with the theatre on the second floor and business offices below. Fire destroyed this building in 1896 and two later opera houses in 1910. By 1905

² Kammerer, "White's Theatre," *Greenville Times*, August 11-24, 1999, 5.

³ Dirks, "Film History Before 1920," *The History of Film*, www.filmsite.org, 2:2-3.6. January 15, 2009.

⁴ "Going to the Show," Documenting the American South digital collection, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/gtts>. April 14, 2009.

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Skinner had this two-story brick structure constructed near the courthouse with the theatre on the second floor and business offices below. Fire destroyed this building in 1896 and two later opera houses in 1910. By 1905 one of these, the Masonic Hall/Opera House, had introduced the public to moving-picture travel films in combination with vaudeville shows. Within the next five years, entrepreneurs began investing in small moving picture theatres or nickelodeons, such as the Pasttime, Electric, Gem, and Amuzu Theatres. Management of these theatres changed frequently, as did their names.⁵

White's Theatre embodies the merger of vaudeville productions with the evolution of the film industry through the first half of the twentieth century. At its opening on June 22, 1914, a tall perpendicular electric sign flashed White's Theatre, and within two years a handsome marquee was installed to protect the central entrance. Contemporary letterhead for the theatre, advertised its seating capacity as 680 and the promotion of "One-Night Stands. High Class Vaudeville and Good Pictures."⁶ The introduction of talking pictures in 1927 prompted the theatre's conversion to a movie theatre in 1930. It was refurbished and named the State Theatre after Publix-Saenger negotiated a forty-year lease for the property. At this time, a bronze finish was applied to its front façade and brass hand rails were installed as well as a new electric sign and canopy at the front entrance. The secondary entrance on the right led into a ladies' parlor, and the entrance on the left opened into an office.⁷ Known as State Theatre until 1970, it stands today as the only early twentieth-century theatre remaining in Greenville.

⁵ Kammerer, "Entertainment in Greenville's Past," *Greenville Times*, April 17-30, 1985, 13.

⁶ Kammerer, "White's Theatre," *Greenville Times*, August 11-24, 1999, 5; Junius D. Grimes Collection, 571.55e, Special Collections, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina, U.S.A.

⁷ "New Theatre Reopens in Greenville Tomorrow," *Daily Reflector*, July 28, 1930, 2.

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9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets)

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“Park Theatre Opens Tomorrow.” *Daily Reflector*, March 24, 1971.

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